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- Title of proposed paper: Semantic molecules
- Keywords: Semantics, lexical typology

### *Abstract*

#### Semantic Molecules

This paper explains and illustrates a recent innovation in NSM semantics, namely the concept of “semantic molecule”. By this is meant a complex meaning which exists as the meaning of an ordinary lexical item in a given language and which functions as an intermediate-level semantic unit (or “chunk”) in the structure of other, more complex lexical meanings.

This paper attempts to do three things: (i) To overview different kinds of semantic molecule, showing how they themselves can be explicated and how they enter into other, more complex lexical meanings. (ii) To show that at least four levels of embedding, i.e. “nesting” of molecules within molecules, are attested in the English lexicon. (iii) To show that some semantic molecules, including impressionistically “basic” ones such as ‘long’ and ‘hard’, are certainly language-specific, while others are possibly language-universal.

Kinds of molecules considered include: body-part meanings such as ‘hands’, ‘legs’, and ‘mouth’, the verb ‘to make’, terms from the natural environment such as ‘ground’ and ‘sky’, physical activities such as ‘eat’, ‘drink’ and ‘sit’, shape descriptors such as ‘long’, ‘round’ and ‘flat’, physical properties such as ‘hard’ and ‘sharp’, words for social categories such as ‘men’, ‘women’, and ‘children’, and taxonomic concepts such as ‘animal’, ‘bird’ and ‘tree’.

The paper briefly compares the NSM concept of semantic molecules with the intermediate-level decomposition as practised by the Moscow School of semantics.

#### Select references

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